

# Reclaiming Native Truth

A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS

A GUIDE FOR ALLIES



# A New Narrative That Changes Hearts and Minds

Our work is most effective and fulfilling when it is grounded in truth, respect and dignity. That holds true for social justice advocates, writers and artists, attorneys and judges, business leaders, reporters, policy-makers, funders, educators and many others.

In this search for truth, there is power in people writing and telling their own stories. There is urgency to erase the stereotypes that can grow into commonly accepted narratives that inform people’s view of “how things are.”

This guide is a tool in our quest to replace false narratives — and specifically the toxic narrative about Native Americans — with the truth. It boils down two years of extensive research and testing — unprecedented in Indian Country — into actionable information you can use to make your work more effective.

National research shows that given just a few facts — shaped around the key themes of shared values, history and visibility — people become more open to understanding and engaging with Native issues, cultures, tribes and peoples. Research confirms that there is a broad, diverse audience that is ready for this new narrative and ready to engage as allies.

As you adopt and reinforce this new narrative through your work, you join a movement advancing our shared goals of truth and connection. You begin to ease the divisiveness in our country. And as you become a stronger ally for Native American peoples and issues, you form new relationships with one of the country’s youngest and fastest-growing populations, one with voting, social media and buying power, as well as incredible wisdom and creativity.

## What Are Narrative and Narrative Change?

**Narrative** is the broadly accepted story that reinforces ideas, norms, issues and expectations in society. It is created by stories passed along between family and friends, by the news media, by entertainment and pop culture, by education and public art, and by policies and much more. It often reinforces stereotypes and the status quo and allows oppressive systems and norms to stay in place.

**Dominant narrative** is the lens through which history is told from the perspective of the dominant culture.

**Narrative change** is an intentional effort to replace an existing narrative with something new. It is a powerful contributor to social change. Narrative change can lead to shifts in attitudes, behaviors, practices and policies — and can lead to deeper and lasting changes in systems and cultures.



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# Reclaiming Native Truth

Native Americans live, thrive and lead all across the United States. As students and teachers, artists and soldiers, doctors and lawyers, and in every walk of life, Native American people work, vote, volunteer, pay taxes, invest in the collective future of all our children, and contribute to their tribes and communities across the country.

Being Native American may mean being deeply involved in protecting, teaching and advancing the knowledge and traditions of one's tribe(s). Or it may mean being less connected to tribal communities while maintaining unique Native American identities in other ways within the larger society. There is no "one way" to be Native American. Every tribe and tribal citizen has a unique culture, history and tradition, and many people identify more as a citizen of a specific tribe(s) than collectively as Native American.

Even with such a strong identity, contributions and presence, however, contemporary Native Americans are largely invisible to the rest of the country. Native American voices are rarely heard in the news, in popular culture or in history books, and what little is reflected in those venues about Native issues and cultures is riddled with misinformation and confusion.

A group of diverse Native and non-Native stakeholders from across the country has conducted unprecedented research and developed a strategy to change this situation as part of an initiative called *Reclaiming Native Truth*. This initiative is designed to eradicate harmful and toxic narratives, stereotypes, structural and institutional racism, dehumanization, and the invisibility of Native Americans. It aims to increase access to opportunities and rights and to ensure that Native Americans live in a society where they are celebrated as a vital part of the fabric of the United States as both leaders and key contributors.

**This initiative is designed to eradicate harmful and toxic narratives, stereotypes, structural and institutional racism, dehumanization, and the invisibility of Native Americans.**

We know what aspects of the true, strengths-based story resonate most strongly, and we have proven that hearing this new story significantly increases people's support of Native Americans and Native issues.

*Reclaiming Native Truth* is the largest public opinion research initiative ever conducted in Indian Country, engaging nearly 20,000 people across the United States through focus groups, surveys and other methods and analyzing nearly five million social media posts, blogs and other commentary. More than 180 people have collaborated to understand the findings and develop a strategy, and the project is supported by investments from a wide range of diverse organizations, from respected Native allies to major funders.

For the first time, we have data about the toxic combination of the invisibility of Native Americans in contemporary society and the pervasive negative stereotypes. We know how this combination leads to ongoing discrimination and lack of support for vital issues and initiatives, as well as how it influences not only the general public but also policy-makers, the judicial system, K-12 education, pop culture, arts, entertainment, the media and philanthropy.

We also have data about pathways for change. We know what aspects of the true, strengths-based story resonate most strongly, and we have proven that hearing this new story significantly increases people's support of Native Americans and Native issues. We have identified new allies — a large, diverse audience that is aligned with Native values and is ready to learn an accurate history, hear Native voices and make Native contributions more visible.

## The False and Harmful Current Narrative About Native American Peoples

What most people in this country know — or think they know — about Native Americans is rooted in myths, stereotypes and half-truths. Information they have received since birth from movies, television, the media and school lessons has created a false narrative (or commonly accepted story) about historic and contemporary Native Americans and tribes.

From a young age, most people in the United States have been immersed in the current dominant narrative about Native peoples. It is a largely false and deficit-based narrative, meaning it focuses on challenges and weaknesses — real, assumed or exaggerated — rather than being based on strengths and opportunities. These narratives are almost always created by non-Native people, often with the intention to oppress Native nations, peoples and cultures.

Sometimes these narratives use outright negative stereotypes. Other times they create stories that seem positive at first but that actually reinforce myths by romanticizing Native cultures and implying that all Native Americans are the same. (Think about Disney's submissive Pocahontas or the idealized Native American characters in *Dances with Wolves*.)

Faulty history lessons, media reports and rumors leave people with the false assumption that individual Native Americans are not U.S. citizens, receive money from the government, don't pay taxes, are rich from casinos and/or go to college for free (all untrue). "Positive" stereotypes blend many unique tribes into one "Native American" persona that is perceived to be committed to family and culture, spiritual and mystical, resilient through historical challenges, fiercely protective of the land, and patriotic to the United States. Non-Natives often hold positive and negative stereotypes together: Native peoples living in poverty *and* rich from casinos; resilient *and* addicted to drugs and alcohol; the noble warrior *and* savage warrior.

These assumptions and contradictions are alive and well thanks to sports teams and consumer products that continue to use derogatory Native American-themed mascots, which some people defend as "honoring" Native Americans (they don't). Schools teach biased and revisionist history, while news media report only on disparities and do not use Native reporters to tell stories of strength. The list goes on and on.

Well-meaning allies — and sometimes even organizations serving Native Americans — often unintentionally spread this false narrative by focusing on deficits rather than assets in an attempt to build support for funding, policies and programs.<sup>1</sup>

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"For years, the lives and experiences of Indigenous peoples have often been introduced or described from a negative perspective. This may be well-intentioned because the narrative draws attention to the many challenges and incredible needs faced by Native peoples, but this narrative reinforces stereotypes and implies hopelessness. Native peoples are deeply hopeful and have an abundance of cultural knowledge that is positive. A better narrative is one that reclaims the truth of our positive values and relationships."

— Cheryl Crazy Bull (*Sicangu Lakota*), President and CEO,  
American Indian College Fund

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The effects are profound. The negative, persistent narrative can harm the self-esteem and aspirations of Native Americans — especially children. It also reinforces negative stereotypes among non-Native people, shaping how they think and act. As individuals, our internalized biases, stereotypes, misunderstandings, ignorance and blind spots are all products of it. Our country has used the false narrative to justify oppressive practices and laws, and historic and systemic racism.

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<sup>1</sup> It is still necessary to point out inequities and challenges facing Native peoples, such as unjust laws and practices, as well as historic and continued discrimination and oppression. But those facts cannot stand alone; they must be placed in context with assets and strengths so as not to reinforce a deficit narrative. See the messaging on pages 16-19 for examples of how this works.

## Harnessing the Power of Narrative for Social Change

The research in *Reclaiming Native Truth* gives us a clear understanding of the existing narrative, the values behind it, who created and controls it, and its consequences. (For more information on the existing narrative, please see the *Reclaiming Native Truth Research Findings Report* at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).) This research lays out a path to shift the dominant narratives in everything from how stories are told and how people are portrayed to how children are taught and how decision-makers are informed.

A new effort is growing out of the work that *Reclaiming Native Truth* began, one that uses a “movement of movements” approach to advance a new narrative that promotes systemic and cultural changes. This movement of movements recognizes, respects and links the existing narrative-change work and efforts of many Native and non-Native allies around a unifying new narrative.

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As part of this national effort, this guide provides non-Native people with insights and tools to shift the narrative about Native Americans, Indian Country and tribal nations. It is designed to help allies build their understanding of narrative change, advance social justice and increase collaboration with Native American peoples in all aspects of society.

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The insights and tips in this guide will help us all work together to build a chorus of voices demanding change, inclusion, and accurate and positive representation in education, popular culture, the arts, media, philanthropy and policy-making. As the new narrative ripples across many different voices and channels, it will begin to seem that “this story is everywhere.”

Ultimately, the dominant stories and expectations will shift, ushering in a new era of equity, respect and empowerment for Native peoples, as well as a richer and stronger society for all people in the United States.



# Our Shared Opportunity



By Suzan Shown Harjo  
(Cheyenne and Hodulgee  
Muscogee)

**LONG-TIME ACTIVIST,  
POET, WRITER, LECTURER,  
CURATOR AND POLICY  
ADVOCATE**

## Replacing False Narratives with the Truth

Narrative change is necessary today! Without it, we remain erased, invisible, out of sight, mind and heart. With it, we gain visibility, contemporary understanding, greater voice and respect.

We stand 5 million strong today, a reality that needs to be reflected in the national narrative. The current narrative, which has erased Native Nations and Citizens from the dominant American narrative, perpetuates the legal framework that allows our sacred places to be desecrated and will not allow us to protect them or even pray there. It sends a signal to grave robbers, defacers of ancient messages, miners and drillers that what they do is not horrifying, destructive and scarring, but that it's somehow normal and okay.

We are citizens of hundreds of sovereign Native Nations. This must become the narrative, replacing the erasure of Native Peoples which lets the U.S. Supreme Court stop our Nations from carrying out their inherent sovereign duties to protect families from violence by anyone, even non-Natives. The current narrative results in freedom for the majority of those who rape, murder and torture tribal citizens. It is the reason our women and children face the highest rates of violence in the U.S. today.

We carry cultural wisdom and professional expertise into every sector of society, both in our tribes and in American communities. We are artists, history makers and storytellers, adept at sharing our past and our current reality. This must become the narrative, replacing the erasure that obscures our true identities and sanctions their replacement with false personae. The deceptive portrayals of our Nations as unfair and unjust — or as generating poor parenting, unworthy grand-parenting and unnurtured children — lead many to think our babies would be better off in non-Native settings. This has played out in tragic legal wrangling, exposing an intense anti-Native sentiment that some segments of society did not attempt to conceal, as well as a shocking ignorance and anti-Native bias among some jurists.

Our young people are strong, proud and resilient. We — and thousands of others — stood with them as they took the lead at Standing Rock. They are reclaiming their cultures and histories on social media, on the stage and in film, and other places of creative expression and leadership. Their voices must spread beyond Indian Country. This must become the narrative, replacing the insidious erasure, which tells our children that they are less than human, and are cartoons, mascots or slurs on a uniform or helmet.

Every harm perpetuated against Native Peoples has been made possible through purposeful erasure, most of which has been carried out by the powerful in governments, educational institutions and the advertising and sports worlds. Even when bad acts are done by individuals, responsible authorities look the other way, often blaming those who are injured for daring to respond to the injury.

We all are trying to do what we can to address the multiplicity of emergencies all around us. If we can come together to create narrative change, we can end the foundational corrosion of erasure and its overlay of false identities, and we will begin to resolve many of the problems we are grappling with in our smaller circles. We cannot do everything, but this is something we can do — change the narrative, and use that to drive systemic, lasting, transformational change.

If we work to restore the narrative that has been erased, we will succeed in generating understanding about laws and policies that continue to devastate our Native world. That will lead to real change. The dominant American narrative dehumanizes, derides and objectifies us. The new narrative tells the truth, the strength of our history, the power of our contemporary attainments, the resilience of our cultures, the continuance of our values. Until we reclaim the narrative about ourselves, our distinctiveness, our diversity, our sovereignty and our nationhood, we will continue to be caught in an erasure quagmire that was designed to secure our extinction. Reclaiming the narrative will be hard work, but it will work, if we do it together.

# Building a New Narrative That Works

Grounded in the research from *Reclaiming Native Truth*, we worked with Native storytellers, artists and advocates from across the country to create a new narrative.

*We tested this narrative in a nationally representative survey and found that support among people who read the narrative increased significantly. Their support was also higher than that of people who answered similar questions a year ago.*

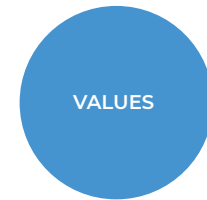
This section includes:

- ◆ The framework: how the narrative is built around four themes that must be present in every communication in order to shift the overall narrative
- ◆ Language for the new narrative, which may be used directly or may be adapted by people and organizations to address specific issues
- ◆ Testing results proving that the narrative works



## The Four Themes That Make the Narrative Strong

The research done by *Reclaiming Native Truth* revealed four key themes that need to be part of the new narrative because, used together, they move hearts and minds:



Native values of family, connection to the land, and respect for culture and tradition are understood and highly respected by non-Native Americans. Linking to these values creates a connection and builds understanding. Illustrating how these values are present today helps prevent a slip into historic, romanticized ideas of Native cultures.



Research shows that most non-Native people do not fully understand the true histories of Native Americans and nations, are open to learning, and feel frustrated when they realize that what they were taught in school was false or incomplete. Weaving in facts — not too many, but a few to get the conversation started — about Native Americans’ histories makes people more receptive to hearing more and more willing to act on many issues of importance to Native Americans.



History must be directly linked to contemporary life. This shows two things: 1) that Native Americans’ cultures and contributions are vital parts of modern life, and 2) that injustices continue today. Because many non-Native Americans don’t know (or don’t realize they know) any Native Americans, highlighting Native peoples’ involvement in every aspect of modern life helps people to move past the systemic erasure and stereotypes and to see what is true today.

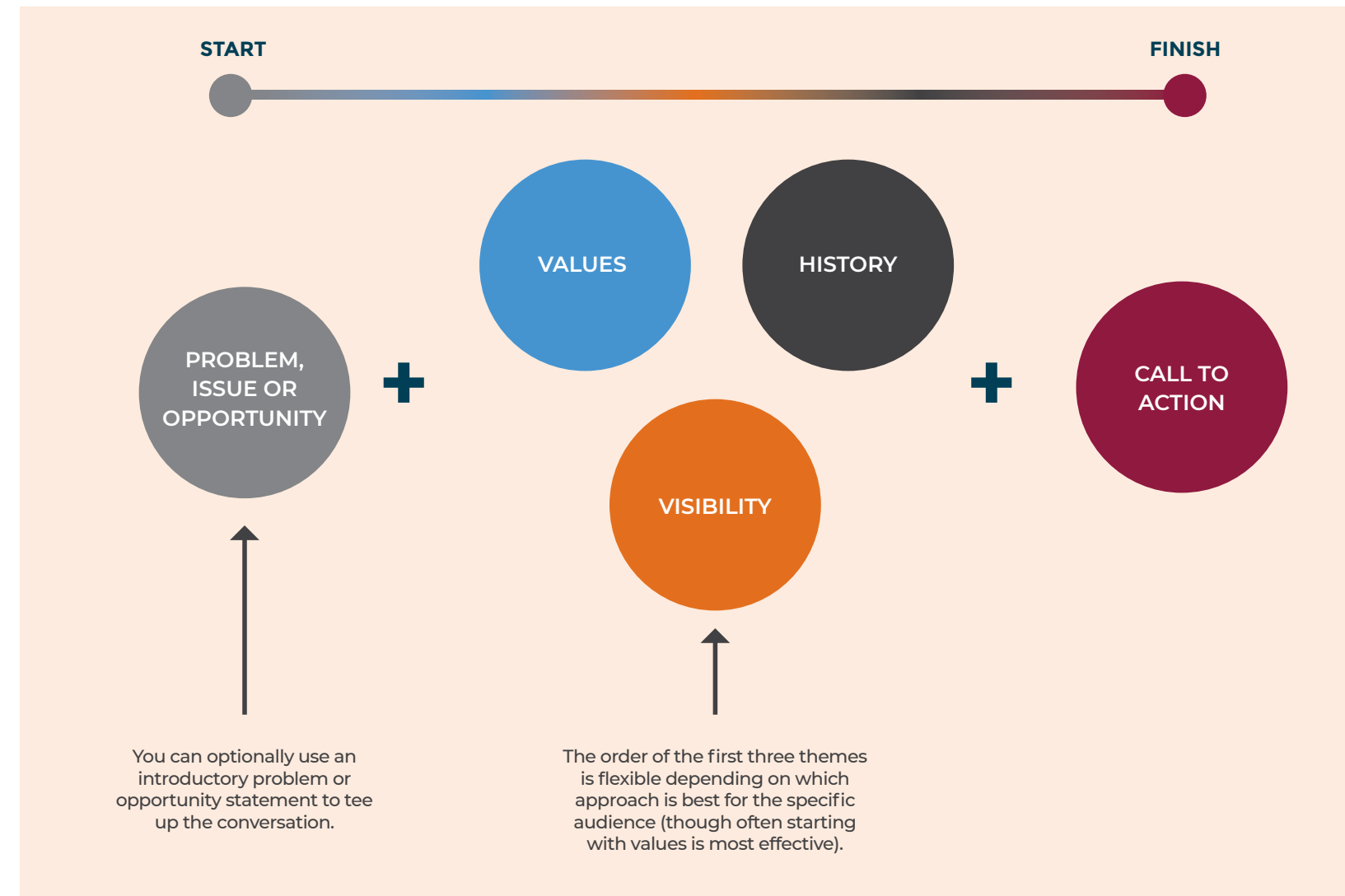


The other essential piece of the narrative is a strong call to action or request for people to do something. It will vary depending on the audience and the issue, but it should be clear, specific and inviting. See the issue-specific narratives on page 16–19 for some examples.

## Narrative Framework

The narrative framework illustrated below is the “recipe” for all communication intended to advance the new narrative. It is highly flexible, enabling Native peoples and allies to incorporate and customize specific messages, facts and stories into the overall recipe.

You can communicate about your issues, histories, stories and opportunities in your unique way — while at the same time echoing, modeling and reinforcing a common, overarching narrative. The key is to use all four themes. On occasion you will be in situations where you need to set additional context by including a problem statement to lead into your narrative.



When you use this framework, you amplify the points that were shown to be most influential in motivating people to support Native peoples and issues.



## The Heart of the Story

The paragraph below summarizes the main narrative that will take hold through this work. You may choose to use the exact language in this narrative; however, it is more likely that you will use it as a guide or an inspiration to shape your own communication. As we advance the intention of this new narrative together, it will become the new dominant idea that people in the United States hold in their hearts and minds, shaping their attitudes, behaviors and decisions about Native American peoples and issues.

To illustrate where the four themes appear in this narrative, we marked:

- Values** in blue
- History** in charcoal
- Visibility** in orange
- Call to action** in red

This narrative paragraph is taken from a longer overarching narrative statement. The longer version, which is included in the appendix, can provide ideas and inspiration as you write your own narrative-based messages and communication.

- The history of Native Americans is one of great strength and revitalization.
- It is a story built around values that have shaped Native cultures and U.S. society: respect for family and elders; shared responsibility to care for the land; and an obligation to do right by the next generation.
- It is a story of resilience through great pain and injustice, from broken treaties and loss of land and language in the past to
- derogatory sports mascots and biased history taught in schools today. Across more than 600 sovereign Native nations<sup>2</sup> and in every profession and segment of society, Native Americans carry the cultural knowledge and wisdom that sustains Native nations and helps build a stronger future for all.
- Let's find our commonalities, celebrate our differences and creatively work together for our shared future and the futures of the next generations.

<sup>2</sup> As of this writing, there are 573 federally recognized tribes and many state-recognized tribes, as well as many other sovereign Native nations.

## People Across the United States Are Ready for This New Narrative

We tested the new narrative in a nationally representative online survey of 2,000 U.S. adults across the country. Half of the people in the survey read the narrative; the other half did not. Both groups answered the same questions about their level of interest in Native American issues, their perception of the amount of discrimination Native Americans face today and their support for key Native issues.

This new narrative — built on values, history, visibility and a call to action — increases people's support of the overall narrative and of several issues that are important to Native Americans. Consider these findings from the survey:

Diverse Native professionals, artists, community leaders and leaders of major Native American organizations also reviewed the narrative for accuracy, usability and effectiveness.

### 81% agreed

81 percent of people agreed with the narrative statement, and only 5 percent disagreed (the remaining 14 percent were neutral).

### 2/3 will share

Two-thirds said they are willing to share this statement with others.

### Works with all

The narrative works with people in all parts of the country — all genders, all age groups, and both Republican and Democratic voters.

### 55% believe

At the beginning of the survey, 34 percent of respondents said they believed that Native Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination. After we introduced the narrative, that number jumped to 55 percent.

## Issue-Specific Narratives

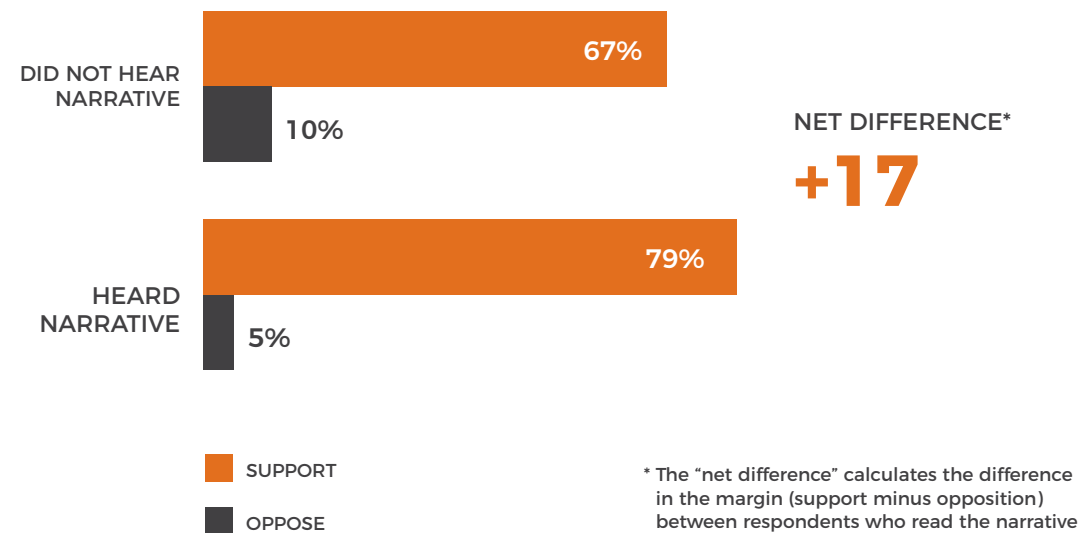
Native American advocates used the four-themed model to create the following messages about specific issues. When these issues are communicated in this way, not only are they more effective on their own, but they also contribute to the overall shift in narrative.

- Values
- History
- Visibility
- Call to action

### Example One: The Importance of Upholding the Indian Child Welfare Act

- Values: All children deserve to be raised by loving families in supportive communities, surrounded by the culture and heritage they know best.
- Visibility: In Native cultures, family is defined very broadly. Everyone plays an active role in raising a child and is ready to help in times of crisis.
- History: But when the U.S. child welfare system was created, it was biased against raising a child in this way – as a community. As a result, the U.S. government removed Native children from their families – not because of abuse or neglect, but because of this communal way of being. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978 to prevent Native American children from being unjustly taken away and adopted outside their culture.
- Visibility: Today, however, ICWA is not consistently respected.
- Call to action: We need to uphold and improve the law to make sure we are doing what is best for Native children.

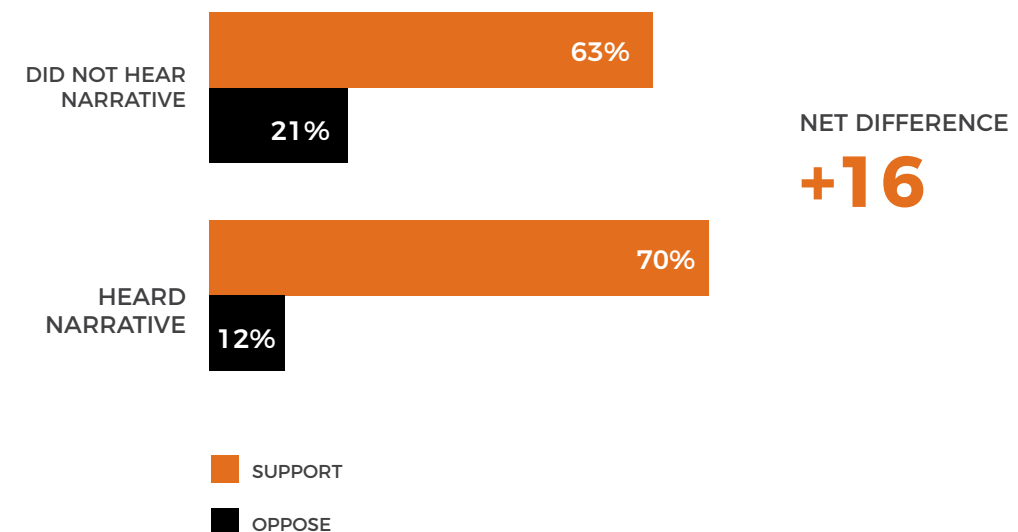
This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



### Example Two: The Need to Uphold Treaties and Sovereignty

- Values: Honor and integrity are important values we all look for in other people. They're important values for countries, too. When a country makes an agreement or signs a treaty, you expect them to live up to it.
- History: And yet, our own country has broken more than 500 treaties with Native nations that were here long before the United States was founded.
- Visibility: Today, there are more than 600 sovereign Native nations within the borders of the United States. Their residents are citizens of both their own Native nations and the United States, and they pay federal taxes like all Americans. Yet, federal and state governments, corporations and individuals continue to violate these treaties and challenge the sovereignty of these independent nations to set their own laws and do what is right for their own citizens.
- Call to action: It is only fair to honor the treaties with Native nations and to respect their sovereignty.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



### Example Three: The Need to Ban Native-Themed Mascots

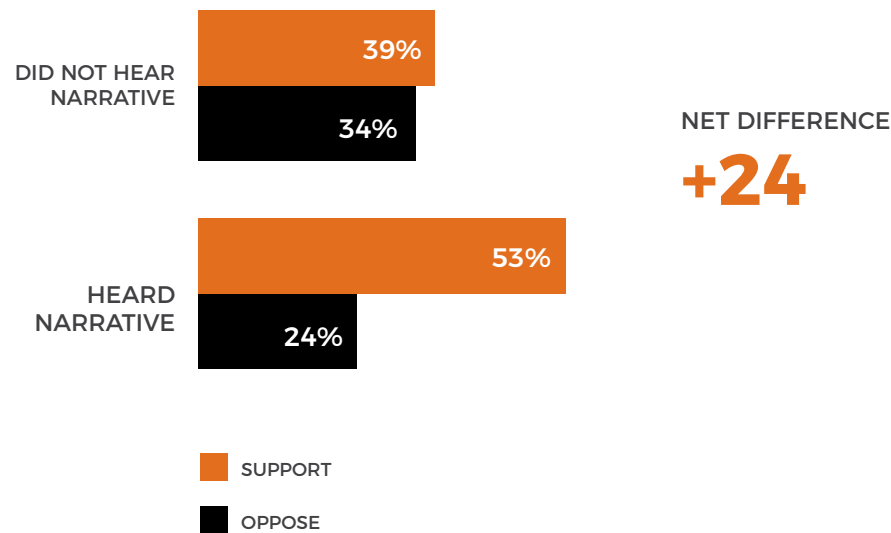
**Values** Our own culture and heritage are important parts of who we are and how we define ourselves.

**History** No one deserves to see their heritage insulted or ridiculed. Yet, for hundreds of years, Native Americans have been mocked and dehumanized by slurs and images in team mascots at every level, from elementary schools to professional sports.

**Visibility** While some people mistakenly believe that these mascots are harmless or even respectful, the mascots actually represent a continued dehumanization of Native peoples and do real psychological harm to Native children.

**Call to action** It's time to eliminate the use of Native American names, symbols and images as team mascots.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



### Example Four: The Need for Native American Voices and Accurate Representation in Entertainment and Pop Culture

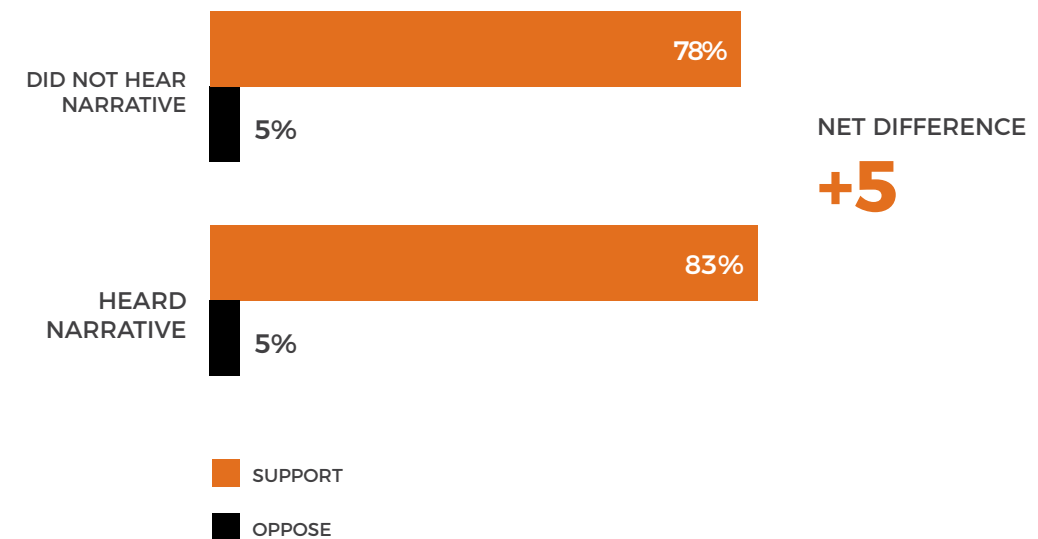
**History** Throughout history and continuing today, representations of Native Americans in entertainment – from books to television shows to movies – have been based on negative stereotypes. Even portrayals that seem positive at first can be harmful if they romanticize Native culture and imply that all Native American peoples are the same. This often occurs because Native characters are played by non-Native people and because Native writers, producers, directors, actors, musicians and others are excluded from the industry.

**Visibility** The truth is that Native storytellers and artists have always been here, and they are increasingly creating and driving innovation in popular culture and the arts.

**Values** The stories and voices of Native American peoples connect with values that are core to American culture and that are needed today more than ever.

**Call to action** Hollywood needs to invest in and promote new Native stories in film and television, hire more Native artists, and replace false depictions with Native peoples' stories.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below. There is less of a change here than with the other issue-themed narratives because support starts very high, at 78 percent.



A group of water protectors travel to a sacred site near the Dakota Access to pray. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas



## Success Story: Standing Rock

Tens of thousands of individuals, hundreds of tribal nations and many allies stood with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its opposition to a pipeline that threatened to destroy the tribe's drinking water, historic treaty lands and sacred sites. From August 2016 through February 2017, millions of Americans and a global audience witnessed a powerful narrative unfold. At a time when most Americans continued to believe that Native Americans and nations no longer exist in the United States, this movement forced a new conversation around values, identity and our collective connection to the Earth and the lands we live on.

The full analysis of this movement is complex; however, we have extracted a few key insights that align with and inform ongoing narrative change:

- The movement **interrupted the systemic erasure of Native Americans**. Contemporary Native Americans populated the daily news diet with articulate, powerful statements that followed an overall shared narrative.
- The movement's core organizers **controlled the narrative** and refused to let opponents and mainstream media define their movement.
- The narrative **centered on the sovereignty** of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe — and all tribal nations — as well as the collective threat that climate change and losing our drinking water poses to us all.
- All **four themes** appeared. The narrative brought **historic injustices** to the present, it was grounded in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's traditional teachings and **cultural values**, it illustrated the **contemporary presence** and leadership of Native Americans and it **invited engagement and support** from across Indian Country, and from diverse non-Native allies around the world.
- The narrative was **repeated over and over**. The core, values-based message — *Mni Wiconi/Water Is Life* — reverberated across social media, citizen journalism and, eventually, mainstream news channels.
- **Many voices** carried the narrative, and everyone had a role. There was unprecedented collaboration and a coalescing of nearly 400 tribes. In addition, many non-Native allies joined the movement, and many remain engaged today.
- The power of Standing Rock wasn't just about narrative; it was also about combining **narrative change with grassroots action**. This made Standing Rock a powerful phenomenon that not only helped awaken understanding and shift perceptions about Native peoples but also elevated their voices and political power.

**This movement forced a new conversation around values, identity and our collective connection to the Earth and the lands we live on.**



Chief Arvol Looking Horse prays near the Dakota Access Pipeline. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas



A water protector gets aid after getting pepper sprayed by law enforcement. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas

Ernesto Yerana, Xicanx/Yaqui/Sephardic  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

# What Can You Do to Change the Narrative?

This new narrative creates a strong chorus of many different voices singing in harmony. When many people, organizations and movements start to use the new narrative in their unique work, the effect is one of “surround sound.” People across the United States begin hearing the same song across their networks of influencers and information sources. Over time, the more positive, accurate, forward-moving narrative becomes the story they are used to hearing.

You can use the overarching narrative and issue-specific narratives shown on pages 16–19 directly if they work in your communications. But it is more likely that you will use them as a map to guide the design of messages, ideas, scripts, stories, programs, lesson plans, cultural exhibits, funding priorities and other communication strategies. **The key is to ensure that every message and communication you create encompasses all four themes — values, history, visibility and a strong call to action.** The way this is done, and the order in which the themes appear, can be adapted to create the most powerful statement for each specific occasion, audience and issue.

Over time, the more positive, accurate, forward-moving narrative becomes the story they are used to hearing.



Princella Redcorn, *Omaha*;  
John Redcorn, *Osage*; and  
Arval Redcorn, *Omaha/Osage*  
Photograph by  
Thomas Ryan RedCorn

## Consider and act upon these questions:

**How can I use my platform** to give voice to others?

**Am I inadvertently contributing to** a false or negative narrative by not taking into account or including contemporary Native peoples in my work? Am I using one Native spokesperson as the representative of all Native Americans?

**Why and how is it important to my work to advance new narratives** about Native Americans as part of building respect across society?

**What can I do** to use this new narrative?

**How can I ensure** that what I am communicating or creating is advancing this new narrative rather than working against it?

**How can I swiftly and strongly correct** false narratives when I see them?

## Be a Part of This Movement of Movements

Link your organization, issue and movement to this work. Visit [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com) to learn more.

## Commit to Advancing the New Narrative Across Your Communications

### Play a supporting role

Respect that Native Americans must be the authors and primary storytellers of this new narrative.

This is a movement of self-determination, power, visibility and leadership by Native Americans — with strong non-Native allies standing beside them. In the discussion, exploration or advancement of Native American issues, play a supporting role to a Native person or group rather than putting your organization in the spotlight.

### Go beyond words

Consider how stories, data and images can advance the new narrative.

Use the narrative to guide the development and review of your annual report, social media and other external communications. Ensure that you're not falling into stereotypes, making assumptions about all tribes based on experiences with or information about one tribe, romanticizing Native cultures and peoples, perpetuating invisibility or echoing false narratives.

Search for images of contemporary Native peoples. There are many excellent photographers and collections available.

## Work with the news media

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If you work with the news media, look for opportunities to share story ideas that support the new narrative.

If you see a story that perpetuates the old narrative, contact the reporter or submit a letter to the editor that brings all four themes together to correct the story and paint a more accurate picture. Suggest that reporters talk directly with Native American people or organizations to include their point of view.

## Make research accurate

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If your organization conducts or uses research to make decisions, consider whether and how to include data about Native Americans, who represent around 2 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>3</sup>

A number of Native nonprofit, research, health and policy organizations would be interested in partnering with you on the best and most appropriate ways to collect the data.

It is necessary to disaggregate data so you can understand how your policies and programs impact Native Americans. If you need assistance in doing this, each region in the United States has a tribal epidemiology center that can assist you ([tribalepicenters.org](http://tribalepicenters.org)).

At the very least, note that you don't have data available for Native Americans if that is the case — doing this helps fight erasure and invisibility in data sets and analysis.

## Use language carefully

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Pay attention to the language you use in conversations among your staff and teams. Help each other see where you are inadvertently falling into assumptions or an old deficit narrative, call on each other to use better practices, and explore how you can shift your language.

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<sup>3</sup> The nation's American Indian and Alaska Native population, including those of more than one race, amounted to 6,706,210 people or about 2 percent of the total population in 2016. Source: Vintage 2016 Population Estimates (see <https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/PEP/2016/PEPALL5N?slice=year-est72016>).

## Shape Your Work to Advance the New Narrative

### Do your homework – and ask for help

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Don't rely on Native Americans to teach you about how to be an ally. It is not their job to explain or defend their cultures, histories or current reality. It's your opportunity and responsibility to learn all you can and to develop the ability to determine what is or is not appropriate. Respectfully seek clarification and insights from people with whom you've built relationships, and respect their critical feedback. See "Information Sources" on page 34 for some places to start.

All of the organizations involved in this project stand ready to help you. Reach out with questions about data, how to build relationships, and how to find organizations and communities to work with around different issues. You are not alone. See [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com) for contact information.

**"The most valuable treasure in Hollywood is a great story. And with allegations of 'fake news,' audiences are hungrier than ever for authenticity. Real voices, true stories and perspectives we don't hear every day are tremendous assets. Investing in Native American stories, storytellers and talent is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do."**

Johanna Blakley, Managing Director,  
the Norman Lear Center

### Hire Native Americans

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Seek out and hire Native Americans in your organization. Appoint Native Americans as board members and to coalitions, advisory groups and commissions. Contract with Native artists and other professionals. Encourage your colleagues and peers to do the same. Challenge the "we can't find anyone" narrative with a commitment to reaching more deeply across and beyond your networks to bring Native American leadership and expertise, cultural values, knowledge and creative voices into your work.

### Bring Native voices into media and entertainment

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If you work in the entertainment field or news media or in pop culture, commit to hiring Native Americans as producers, directors, editors, artists, writers and so forth. Commit funding to Native projects. Erase outdated, stereotypical and inaccurate depictions in your work, and do not create Native stories or representations without Native Americans leading and/or guiding the work.

## Interrupt and correct the false narrative

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If you hear or see others perpetuating myths, stereotypes or other aspects of the false narrative — whether out of ignorance or blatant racism — share with them the correct information. Use the narrative and narrative-framed messages to start a new conversation. (See "Lifting Up Truths" on page 34.)





“We direct four out of every 10 grant dollars to Native-led organizations. I would like to reach a point where this is not so unusual or surprising to other foundations. All we do is build relationships in Indian Country, find great organizations and fund them. We believe helping Native people thrive on their own terms is at the heart of racial healing and it greatly enhances our work. This kind of dedicated commitment to engaging with Native communities must go beyond any one funder to our entire field.”

Kevin Walker, President & CEO,  
Northwest Area Foundation

### Fund Native organizations and issues at parity

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If you are a grantmaker, ensure that you are supporting Native American issues and organizations at a level at least at parity with the U.S. population. This means that at least 2 percent of your grantmaking dollars would be allocated in this way. There are more than five million Native Americans and more than 600 sovereign Native nations in the United States, so there’s a good chance your service area overlaps. No matter what issue you prioritize, from education to health to the environment, Native Americans continue to experience inequities and are leading the way to innovative solutions.

Hire Native American program officers and staff, and recruit Native peoples to be on your board, grant review teams, advisory committee and other points of engagement. Collect and include data on Native Americans through your research and grantmaking. See “Make research accurate” on page 26 for details.

### Play a supportive role


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Step out of the leadership role and play a supporting role to Native peoples. Instead of leading the conversation, advising the group, fixing the problem or facilitating the solution, listen and support the Native Americans leading the conversation.

### Understand sovereignty

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If you are an elected official or if you work in the governmental, legal or judicial system, take a class on tribal law and sovereignty. If you are a law professor, ensure that your students have knowledge of and respect for tribal law and sovereignty.



“Understanding tribal law and sovereignty is mandatory for policy-makers, judges and lawyers who work on federal law or state law in states with Native nations and is highly beneficial for all others who will likely encounter tribal law in their work. Most people who work on Native American issues and tribal law admit they know little about it. This is not only unwise; it’s also dangerous.”

Wilson Pipestem (*Otoe-Missouria*),  
Pipestem Law

## Make Native peoples visible

When organizing meetings and conferences, do some research to find out what tribes traditionally occupied the land where you are meeting. At the opening of your meeting, acknowledge whose land you are on.

Learn enough about Native peoples and tribes living in your community or region to be able to understand cultural context, historical perspectives and connections to place that may impact perspectives on or approaches to an issue. A great way to do this is to offer your services to a local board, working group or other collaboration on Native American issues. See “Information Sources” on page 34 for other resources.

## Advocate for accurate Native history

Advocate for your state or local school board to adopt a policy to teach accurate Native American history and contemporary facts. If you are a state, district or local school administrator or a classroom educator, use leading-edge history curriculum resources to ensure that what your students are learning is accurate and that it advances the new narrative. Visit Native Knowledge 360° from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian ([nmai.si.edu/nk360/](http://nmai.si.edu/nk360/)) to learn more and find resources. You can also contact local tribal governments to ask for resources or invite them to play a role in what students are learning.

“We are trying to get people to think differently, more broadly, more inclusively about American Indians beyond the eight or 10 stories that are so ubiquitous in textbooks.”

Edwin Schupman (*Muscogee*),  
Manager, Smithsonian National Museum  
of the American Indian

## Seek a variety of Native voices

Recognize that one Native American voice does not speak for all Native Americans. Talk with Native American people and groups separately, one on one, instead of in a group forum where it’s more likely that one or some voices may dominate. You can say: “I don’t want to make the mistake of assuming that all Native American people or groups see things the same way. Can you please tell me what you/your organization thinks about this issue?” Keep working to build long-term relationships, even if you don’t receive an initial response or openness. Engagement requires building relationships and trust. Your continued persistence may show individuals and organizations that your questions and invitations are sincere and worth responding to.

## Say no to mascots

Do not accept Native American-themed mascots or names in sports or commercial products. They are not honorific or respectful; they are derogatory and harmful.

**End any support** your organization may be providing to these teams or products through your policies or practices. For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), guided by Native American and other organizations, changed the eligibility guidelines for an award that recognizes sports teams for promoting good health. The new policy states: “RWJF will not consider an application if it is submitted by an entity whose name, brand, or practices — in the Foundation’s judgment — denigrates, harms or discriminates against any racial or ethnic group. For example, a team with a name or mascot that, in RWJF’s view, denigrates Native Americans will not be eligible for the award.” See more at [usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/05/07/kansas-city-chiefs-washington-redskins-racist-mascots-football-rwjf-sports-award-column/584858002/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/05/07/kansas-city-chiefs-washington-redskins-racist-mascots-football-rwjf-sports-award-column/584858002/).

### Join movements to call for a ban.

See [changethemascot.org](http://changethemascot.org) and [ncai.org/proudtobe](http://ncai.org/proudtobe).

# Resources

## Lifting Up Truths

Although myths and stereotypes about Native Americans abound in the current narrative, here are some truths, and ways to tell them, that can cut through the misinformation.

**Native-themed sports mascots do not honor Native Americans.** Growing evidence, including research findings by *Reclaiming Native Truth*, shows that the majority of Native Americans find Native-themed mascots harmful and offensive.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that these mascots are damaging to Native high school and college students, negatively impacting feelings of personal and community worth, and that they reinforce bias among non-Native people. Did you know that the derogatory moniker “R\*dskins” comes from the time when government bounty announcements called for the bloody scalps of Native people back in the 1800s? (Note that this name is so offensive that Native Americans call it the “R-word,” replace the “e” with “\*” to avoid writing it, or simply refer to “the Washington football team.”)

**Native Americans are citizens of tribes and citizens of the United States.** They pay taxes just like everyone else.

**The federal government *does not* give benefits to Native Americans just for being Native Americans.**

**Most Native Americans do not get income from casinos.** In fact, the majority of tribes in the United States do not operate casinos. The 43 casinos that generate the majority of all tribal gaming revenue benefit just 5 percent of tribal citizens.

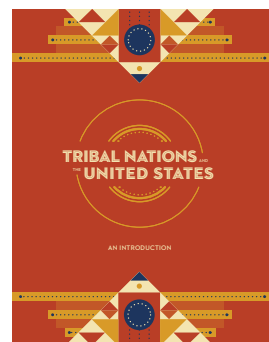
**Native Americans are here to stay.** There are more than five million Native American peoples and more than 600 sovereign Native nations in the United State today. In many urban areas, Native Americans are among the fastest-growing segments of the population.

<sup>4</sup>In focus groups with Native Americans, four out of five said they are offended by Native-themed mascots. This is in contrast to two national surveys (conducted independently of our research and highly contested by leaders in Indian Country for their methodology) that found that Native Americans are not offended by Native American-themed mascots.

## Information Sources

Check out these websites for more information, data, stories and other resources to help you learn more about Native American peoples, cultures and issues and to gain confidence as an ally.

- American Indian College Fund ([collegefund.org](http://collegefund.org))
- Center for Native American Youth ([cnay.org](http://cnay.org)): Information about policies, issues and youth perspectives
- Echo Hawk Consulting ([echohawkconsulting.com](http://echohawkconsulting.com))
- First Nations Development Institute ([firstnations.org](http://firstnations.org)): Information about economic development in Indian Country
- Indian Country Media Network ([indiancountrymedianetwork.com/today/](http://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/today/)): Native American news and issues
- National Congress of American Indians ([ncai.org](http://ncai.org)): Information about tribes, policy issues and more



“Tribal Nations and the United States” ([ncai.org/about-tribes](http://ncai.org/about-tribes)): An excellent starting point for people who want to learn more about tribal nations and Native history

NCAI “Tribal Directory” ([ncai.org/tribal-directory](http://ncai.org/tribal-directory)): Searchable by state

- National Museum of the American Indian’s Native Knowledge 360° ([nmai.si.edu/nk360](http://nmai.si.edu/nk360)): Materials for educators and schools
- Trahan Reports ([trahantreports.com](http://trahantreports.com)): News on Native American issues
- Urban Indian Health Institute ([uihi.org](http://uihi.org)), which includes an Urban Indian Dictionary (<http://uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Urban-Indian-Dictionary.pdf>)



Autumn Only A Chief, Pawnee/Otoe  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

## A Note About Language

Knowing what words to use and not use can make all the difference in comfortably initiating and joining conversations and advancing an accurate, positive narrative.

For reference, we recommend the following:

- Native American Journalists Association, Reporter’s Indigenous Terminology Guide ([naja.com/reporter-s-indigenous-terminology-guide/](http://naja.com/reporter-s-indigenous-terminology-guide/))
- Native American Rights Fund, FAQs ([narf.org/frequently-asked-questions/](http://narf.org/frequently-asked-questions/))

Terminology varies in different places across the country and can be a matter of personal preference. Refer to your local tribal government’s website for specifics. As you get to know Native organizations and leaders, listen for what terminology they use and prefer. When in doubt, ask.

Following are a few specifics you’ll see in this guide:

- There are many diverse Native American peoples, cultures and histories. We use the plural of each term intentionally.
- Different organizations use different terms to refer to the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Common terms are *Native American*, *American Indian* and *Alaska Native (AI/AN)*, *Native peoples*, and *Indigenous peoples*.
- People are citizens, not members, of tribes. Preferred terms are *tribal citizen*, *tribal nation* and *Native nation*. If you are talking about a specific Native nation and its citizens, use the tribe’s name rather than the general *Native American*. For example, say, “According to the tribal chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe,” or “We spoke with Mary Smith, a citizen of the Navajo Nation.” If you are unsure of how to refer to a tribal nation, check the tribe’s website for the preferred terminology and full legal name.

# The Collaborators Behind This Guide

Thank you for your interest in this effort. Creating lasting change will take commitment, creativity and collaboration among all of us — Native Americans and non-Native allies alike. We hope you will join us in changing the narrative and increasing respect, opportunity and equity for Native Americans, as well as building a stronger and more just society for all people.

This work began as *Reclaiming Native Truth*, a collaborative initiative of Echo Hawk Consulting and First Nations Development Institute.



It has since transitioned into a movement of movements, with many people advising, inspiring and supporting this work, from initial research through development of the new narrative and this message guide. In particular, we express our gratitude to the following people, who were instrumental in creating the narrative and this guide:

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# Appendix: Long Version of the Narrative

This narrative was created especially for allies who want to apply the narrative to their work. There is also a version of this narrative for use by Native American peoples and organizations. The themes and meaning are the same, but the voice is different. If you're interested in comparing the two, you can find the guide for Native American organizations at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).

Important note: All four themes must be used together in every communication. We break them out here to clarify the intention of each theme. Together, they form the long version of the new narrative. When you creating narrative-based messages, be sure to incorporate all four themes. You may use or modify elements of the language that follows if it works, or you may develop your own way to express your issue through all four themes.

## Values theme

Our world needs more of the values and traditional knowledge that anchor Native American cultures: deep respect for family and elders; shared responsibility to care for the land and community; and knowledge that all actions affect future generations. These values keep Native American tribes and cultures strong today and are helping to build a stronger and more resilient future for all.

## History theme

The history of Native Americans is our shared history and a vital part of American history, and we can learn from it together. It is a living and evolving story of resistance, resilience, economic strength and cultural revitalization visible in tribal nations and in all Indigenous peoples. Native Americans' contributions to the land, arts, sciences, literature, foods, political structures, judicial systems, cultures and philosophies are foundational to our country's strength and power. This story also is a painful history of wrongdoing and loss: languages driven underground or to extinction, children stolen from their homes and punished for not assimilating, whole Native nations forced to move from their homelands, and thousands of treaty promises broken by Congress and the U.S. justice system. Injustices persist in laws created to oppress, inaccurate histories taught in schools, demeaning personifications of Native Americans in sports and advertising, and cultural appropriations.

## Visibility theme

As one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the country, Native Americans bring rich history and cultural wisdom into U.S. society. Within families, across more than 600 sovereign Native nations, and in our shared neighborhoods, schools, and communities, Native Americans are teachers, doctors, lawyers, artists, writers, scientists, politicians and more. Native Americans are rejuvenating language and culture, advancing laws and justice, and contributing to every aspect of society. In movements like Standing Rock, Native Americans — especially young people — are leading and building on thousands of years of accumulated knowledge to address some of our country's most important current issues.

## Call-to-action theme

Native Americans' wisdom, values, historical experiences and creative resilience are greatly needed to sustain Native nations and to care for our lands and waters, our urban and rural communities, our country, and our planet.

Let's work together to find commonalities, celebrate our differences and work together for our shared future and the futures of the next generations.

**For more information or to follow and join this movement of movements, please visit [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).**



[www.firstnations.org](http://www.firstnations.org)



[www.echohawkconsulting.com](http://www.echohawkconsulting.com)